

# The Great Seal: Symbol and Identity

The Great Seal of the United States is a unique symbol of our country and national identity. Sometimes called the Eagle and the Shield, our Seal links to a tradition of official use that dates back thousands of years to guarantee and authenticate laws, treaties, ownership, rights and secrets.

This exhibit looks back to the ancestors of the modern Seal, traces the origins of the Great Seal and celebrates its significance in the United States today.



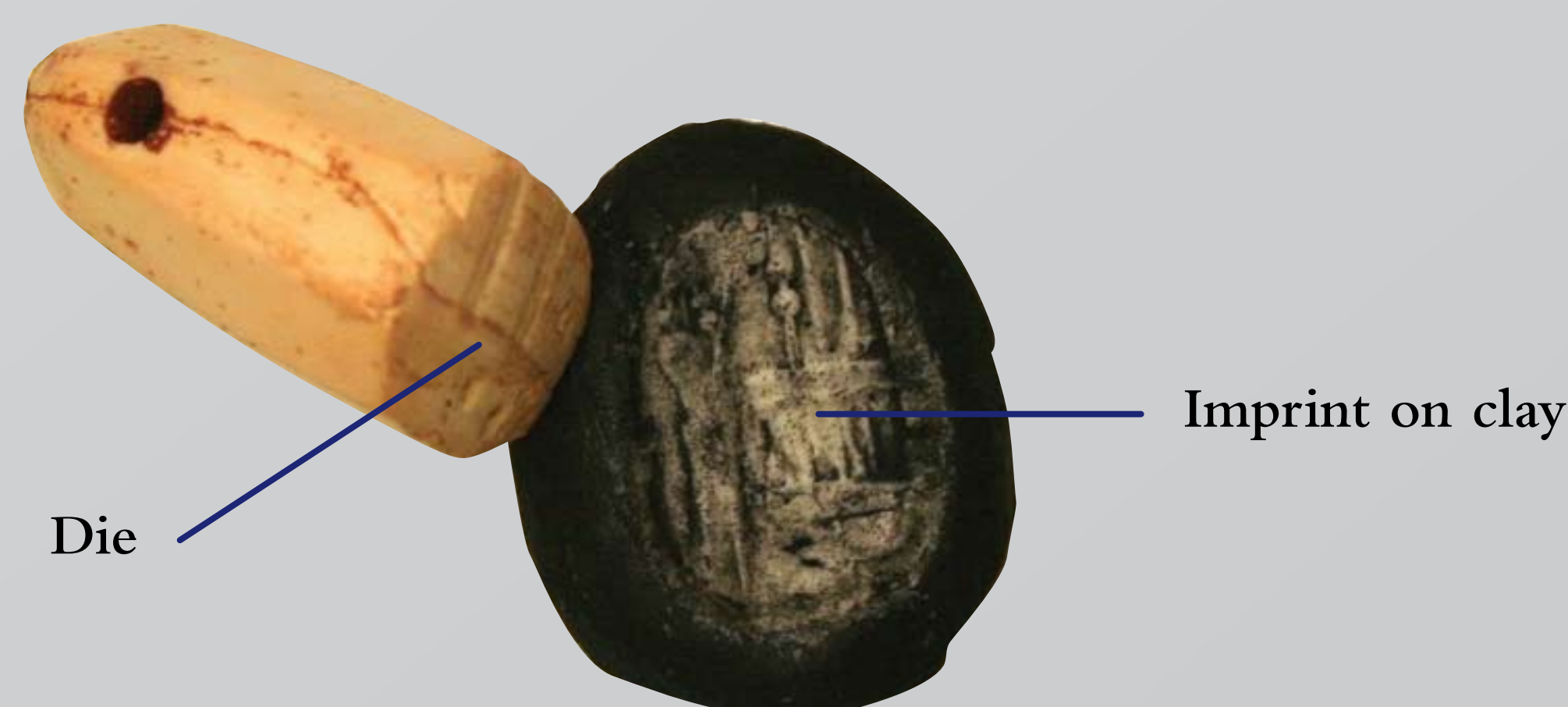
Great Seal in Needlepoint  
Gift of Alamance County,  
North Carolina Chapter  
American Needlepoint Guild, 1984

## WHAT IS A SEAL?

The first seals were carvings or etchings in stone, bone or other hard material that formed a tool called a die. The die pressed into soft material like clay or wax, creating an impression, or a seal. Paper seals only came later. Today we call both the die and the imprint a seal.



Sumerian Cylinder Seal of Queen Puabi of Ur (replica)  
c. 2550 – 2400 BCE



Neo-Babylonian Stamp Seal (replica)  
c. 700 – 550 BCE

U.S. citizens needing to authenticate or notarize documents while in a foreign country can turn to a diplomat called a consul. He or she presses down on the lever of this device to imprint the required seal.



Consular Seal used at U.S. Consulate, Manchester, England  
c. 1900 – 1960

## ORIGINS OF SEALS

Seals could protect property and secrets, identify and certify ownership, confirm legal matters and validate important documents. Rulers used seals to proclaim and authorize their sovereignty. Some people wore seals as amulets for defense against evil.

Use of seals has not changed greatly since first appearing in Mesopotamia about 3500 BCE, when people began to amass and trade their wealth, build cities and develop writing.



Old Babylonian Stamp Seal (replica)  
c. 2000 – 1600 BCE

Early seals appeared over a wide geographical area. Monarchs, emperors, nobles and clergy devised them to rule or conduct their business.



The Seal of King John I  
was attached to all copies of  
Magna Carta hand written  
in 1215 (replica).